THE WAY OF SAINT JAMES

Hiking the Camino with My Daughter

Neil Christian Damgaard

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To Susanna

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BEGINNING

In the spring of 2017 my younger daughter, Susanna, was visiting my wife and me in our home in New Bedford—where she had grown up. Susanna is a veteran Registered Nurse, a graduate of Messiah College and the Yale University School of Public Health and at that time, employed by Swedish Hospital in Seattle. We were watching the Martin Sheen film, *The Way*, which he made with his son, Emilio Estevez, in 2010.

It was a good film, a fictional story about a California ophthalmologist from Ventura, California, whose son (played by Estevez) decides to leave his doctoral studies in graduate school and hike the Camino de Santiago ("The Way of St. James") thousand-year-old pilgrimage trail across northern and Central Spain, a 500-mile route. Sheen himself hiked the Camino in truth, too, not just in the screenplay.

The film was enjoyable, and impulsively, I said to Susanna with no forethought at all, "we should do that."

It was probably a moment of small derangement for me, as I reflect now. Susanna is an accomplished hiker, a "triple crowner", having completed full hikes of the Appalachian Trail (2,197 miles), The Pacific Crest Trail (2,650 miles) and the Continental

Divide Trail (3,100 miles). She has also hiked in France, Italy, Portugal, Mexico, Sweden, Finland and Slovenia and on many shorter U.S. trails too. How I could have imagined such a silly suggestion, at a moment of post-movie-watching euphoria, I cannot fathom. But Susanna took my challenge, and said, "Yes, let's do it."

I then spent the next year attempting to get into some kind of passable "shape" to undertake the hike. I read books, coordinating planning with Susanna, who was nothing but encouraging and affirming about the coming project, not to mention voicing her confidence in my ability to improve my physical stamina, learn some basic hiking skills, equipment terminology, decision-making ability and negotiate a "sabbatical" with my employer, Dartmouth Bible Church who I had been serving as Senior Pastor since 1983 (35 years at that point) and had never taken a sabbatical before. I also needed Renée's complete support, who happily granted it for both me and our daughter in this undertaking. She set to faithfully praying for the hike and cheerfully assented to the financial cost that the trip would entail.

CIRCUIT

$299.99

Susanna had an excellent backpack made for me by an outfitter in Utah, which I began to use on my local short hikes, which were

mainly around the University down the street from my church. I began with one decent sized *Systematic Theology* and gradually added another book, then another so that by spring 2018 I was walking with six or seven books in my pack on each hike. My training hikes (no hills) went from 2 miles in the beginning to 4 by end. The pack-experience is unlike any other—you are carrying all of YOU in a single portable bundle, for two months.

So I started walking and did so throughout the rest of 2017 and into 2018, down to our departure at the end of May.

CHAPTER ONE

I always had, I thought, a good relationship with my two daughters. Our home was not without the usual stresses. There were times of tension, the usual traumas of losing grandparents, money matters, time balancing with the church on my mind all the time, education issues and later, dating, college and career choices. But I always thought I enjoyed a good history of communication, love and devotion, commitment and humor with my girls. And it was a "pastor's home" and my girls grew up in an atmosphere that is somewhat typical of a clergyman's lifestyle: always under the watchful eye of the congregation. Susanna and her sister, Jocelyn, could speak to that reality well. I don't know if they have any happy memories of growing up in a ministry family, but I know they certainly have no naivete about it.

I had travelled some with our older daughter, Jocelyn. I travelled as one of the chaperones and as "band chaplain" with her high school (third largest east of the Mississippi) marching band to march and play in the 1997 Presidential Inauguration Parade; and we visited the White House that weekend—a special arrangement by our Senator (whom we met), Senator Edward Kennedy. She and I spent a few days in Gettysburg upon her high school graduation (2000), in Washington D.C. visiting museums after her college graduation (in 2006) and then in 2013, a more dramatic and longer trip to Germany and Belgium. They are all pleasant memories for me.

And so, the notion of attempting a long-distance, seven-week excursion with my other daughter had a warm appeal. Susanna

possesses a verve for life, a deeply refined sense of humor, a great willingness to sacrifice if the call to give makes sense and a keen, almost uncanny way of reading me. She also gave me confidence that we *could* do the trip successfully and we set to studying the relevant books and blogs about the Camino.

We went to a specialty outdoors outfitter and purchased for me two pair of *Brooks* hiking shoes for me which I began to wear on my short prep-walks to adequately break them in. I wore the backpack that Susanna had built for me and put theological books in it, gradually increasing weight over the year before our "launch." We surveyed the various vendors for hiking equipment although this was a market-survey with which she was well acquainted. I purchased two lightweight jackets, two pair of hiking trousers, two carefully researched hiking poles, a hiker's umbrella, and a few other items needed to outfit my pack for the trip. Susanna already owned a complete hiking veteran's "kit" (as in military jargon). We purchased our airline tickets to London, and planned to fly from there to Biarritz, France, on the Atlantic coast and travel by French rail to St. Jean Pied de Port, the trailhead for the Camino into Spain.

I was nervous, and spoke of this to Susanna, about my stamina and ability to keep up at all with her. She was nothing but encouraging about that. She said we would make adjustments along the way as needed. I appreciated her encouragement and assuring spirit that this was a great thing to work towards! I think she was looking forward to it, was not leaving a husband or "significant other" behind and ready again to hit the trail. Renée also assured me that she would be fine although she and I had never been apart for more than a week at a time. That would be a strange experience for me. We were in our 43rd year of marriage.

I was still a full-time pastor, working an average of 60 hours/ week which had always been my routine. I was in my 35th year at the same church. I had never taken a "sabbatical" which seems common enough now. I knew that our local university granted

a six-month at full-pay sabbatical or a 12-month at half-pay sabbatical to tenured faculty members there, every seven years. It seemed reasonable to me to request of our church a two-month sabbatical especially since I had never taken one before. Our Trustees were not overly sympathetic and granted a one-month paid sabbatical and the offer that I could use vacation time for whatever other time I needed. I planned on taking three weeks of vacation time to supplement the sabbatical month. And I was of yet, not planning to retire or change employers.

Susanna was living in Seattle at the time, working at Swedish Hospital in labor and delivery. Getting time off for the hike would not be a problem, she said. And she was as enthusiastic as I was, I think, to undertake such an exploit!

CHAPTER TWO

As I learned about this trail in Spain, mostly, it was something about which I knew nothing and not had heard of before viewing Martin Sheen's film. The *Camino de Santiago* is a thousand-year-old pilgrimage trail—also called *The Way of Saint James*--with a number of interconnecting routes. Our route--the traditional path--begins in southern France. There are no gaudy American-like entry palisades or food courts. There are no massive signs, with neon arrows, the trail begins here. There were no finely dressed guides or host-explainers of anything. There is no billboard of Martin Sheen.

The Camino Frances to Santiago (or French Way) begins in the French town of **St. Jean Pied de Port** in the French Basque

Country and continues through the Pyrenees in its first "leg" until reaching Pamplona, Spain in about 46 miles. At the time of year that we began, at the end of May, the town was buzzing with many pilgrims. Most hike from east to West, since the cathedral at Santiago is the climactic destination, usually. However, some begin there and hike east, and even further into France and even as far as the Netherlands. The town has narrow streets, mostly stone buildings, French (complete with a discernible attitude, I thought) and is utterly charming. But I am getting ahead of myself…

We rode Amtrak from Lakeville, Massachusetts to Logan Airport in Boston. We then flew to London where we stayed in a Japanese hostel for two nights. We also visited Abbey Road, stood in front of the EMI studios (where so many Beatles songs were recorded), crossed the crosswalk, me taking many pictures, Susanna indulging me with an eye-roll or two, and both of us looking so American to local

people. We then "trained" to London Stansted airport, out of which fly Ryanair flights all over Europe. Ryanair is an extremely low-cost, no frills, airline (flying 737s) and I think we paid about $35 for the flight to Biarritz, France. I also note that

Stanstead was originally an RAF field and then an 8th Army Air Force bomber station during World War II, hosting B-17s and B-26s. My cousin Lois's husband, Leo, was a B-26 pilot who flew 72 missions. Maybe he flew out of Stansted?

We arrived in Biarritz, a charming old French seacoast city and stayed one night, walking on the beach for a beautiful, Atlantic Ocean sunset. We were supposed to take French rail the next day to St. Jean Pied de Port, but learned only upon arriving in Biarritz that French rail was on strike. So, we had to take a taxi the 20 miles to the trailhead town. After obtaining our "passports" in an office designated for such, we began our hike. As did Sheen in the movie, we began by walking over a little stone bridge crossing the small Nive river, down and out of the town and on to the trail. A "passport" is a folded brochure, with spaces for stamping at each hostel along the way. This is an important feature and if complete, it earns the *Compostela* certificate in the Pilgrim Office in Santiago —500 miles away.

We also procured scallop shells, tied them to our backpacks, which is the symbol of the Camino. I learned subsequently that some tourists like to hike the last 70 miles of the Camino as a vacation outing because a *Compostela* is awarded for that short version of the pilgrimage. This, I was told, is more an American practice.

Omnes dies et noctes quasi sub una sollemnitate continuato gaudio ad Domini et apostoli decus ibi excolunter. Valve etiadem basilice minime clauduntur die noctuque, et nullatenus nox in ea fuisse est haberi astra [cf. Ap 21,25], quia candelarum et cereorum splendida luce ut meridies fulget'. (Códice Calixtino)

El Cabildo de la Santa Apostólica Metropolitana Catedral de Santiago de Compostela sita en la región occidental de Las Españas, a todos los que vieren esta carta de certificación de visita, hace saber que:

Antonio Gutiérrez Ramírez

ha visitado La Basílica donde desde tiempo inmemorial los cristianos veneran el cuerpo del Beato Apóstol Santiago.

Con tal ocasión, el Cabildo llevado del deber de caridad, al tiempo que con gozo, le dan al peregrino el saludo del Señor y piden -por intercesión del Apóstol- que el Padre se digne concederle las riquezas espirituales de la peregrinación, así como los bienes materiales. Bendígalo Santiago y sea bendito.

Dada en Compostela, Meta del Camino de Santiago, el día 12 del mes febrero del año 2014

Después de realizar 775 Kms. Desde Saint Jean Pied de Port
donde comenzó el 5 de enero del 2014 por la ruta del Camino Francés

Segundo L. Pérez López
Deán de la S.A.M.I. Catedral de Santiago

It interests me how people love small, tangible tokens of spirituality, or what they perceive to be spirituality. (Christian bookstores—which used to be all over the place, before CBD and Amazon, etc.--used to capitalize on this wish). These physical tokens give adherents a small but tangible and visible reminder of their otherwise invisible faith. Catholics wear crosses and medals with pictures of "saints" on them around their necks. Jewish homes sometimes have a small capsule with a piece of scripture at the door called a ***mezuzah***. Residents traditionally place a small kiss on the capsule when they enter or leave the residence. Muslims and others regal themselves with robes and beards and hair or face coverings (or varying extremity) for women. All of these testify, to me, the inescapable—even if only subconscious —awareness that we are not just *animals,* albeit of a high genus. We have a spirit, a soul, a will and intellect. As God made us, we somehow possess a built-in awareness that this material life is not all there is. We are more. Evangelicals typically scorn the wearing of any physical display of faith, except in tattoos or in theme-merchandise—coffee mugs, t-shirts, figurines, bumper stickers and Facebook posts. But that is another story…

We stayed our first night in an *albergue* (a hostel) in the ny village of Arneguy, France. Sometimes the rooms are community with multiple beds, other times like a small hotel room. We were the only guests that night and the owner was very kind and hospitable, an older single woman, making us dinner herself for which we felt some privilege. She was French, and was hesitant to say much about her Spanish Basque neighbors just across the border. We crossed that border between France and Spain in the rain without fanfare by fording a small stream and walking

up a hill to the village of Valcarlos, about two miles from Arneguy. Our first coffee stop of the day could not have been more wonderful! On the whole trip I think I drank three kinds of beverage: hot coffee, Coke Zero and water.

The so-called '*Napoleon Route*', which we took, is so beautiful because it passes through *Roncesvalles* at an altitude of 1,450 meters. Napolean and his soldiers took this route in July 1813 and fought there in the Battle of

Roncesvalles.The views from *Roncesvalles* are spectacular and from there we could see the Pyrenees Mountains in all their early summer splendor. It is 40 miles from Roncesvalles to Pamplona, the first big city on our trip. In Roncesvalles we stood outside the Iglesia de Santiago (Church of St. James), built in the 1200s. As I remember it, Susanna got to go inside briefly. Susanna hiked again later in the Pyrenees (in 2019) on a route west to east, ending at the Mediterranean on the Haute Route (497 miles). For my pace the 40 miles would take a few days, and then just walking into a big Spanish city was a bit surreal. I was still in a "Ok Spain —entertain me" mode. That would pass soon.

Before getting to Pamplona, we arrived in **Zabaldika** which includes a 12th century church with bell tower. It is situated at the foot of Mount Narbal, on the right bank of the River Arga. It was a place of noble lordship, where the Order of the Hospitallers of Saint John of Jerusalem in the 13th century and Saint Mary of Roncesvalles in the 14th century had various interests. The climb to the village was challenging. The sisters, four of them, were the hosts, assisted by volunteer men. The hostel was accommodating, well-provisioned for meals and given to a warm receptivity. One very old sister, when told by my daughter (in Spanish) that I am an American pastor, asked me if "are you 'presbooterian'?" She carefully listened to my reply and could not have given me a

warmer welcome. It was almost

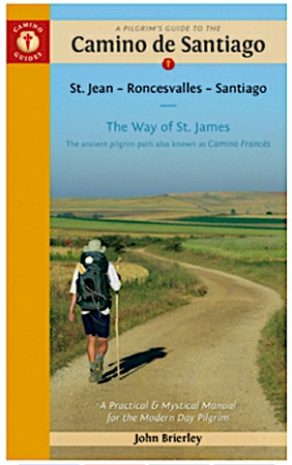
embarrassing. Then she asked me if I could like to “ring the church bell” at the proper time. I answered in the affirmative and we climbed a very narrow, very ancient stone staircase to the bell tower where I was able to ring the bell four times.

Pamplona is a world-famous city known for its “running of the bulls”, known as *San Fermin*. This first section of the Camino was one of the most difficult but also one of the most beautiful routes on the entire Camino de Santiago. The city was a favorite of Ernest Hemingway and we stayed one night in a simple *albergue* in which he himself had stayed, we were told. I enjoyed lying in the bed, exhausted, looking up at the cracks in the ceiling, seeing the dying sunlight beams of that late afternoon through the old windows and wondering if old Ernest had stayed in this room? A silly fantasy. I think I remarked as such to Susanna, but she was already asleep in the bunk next to mine.

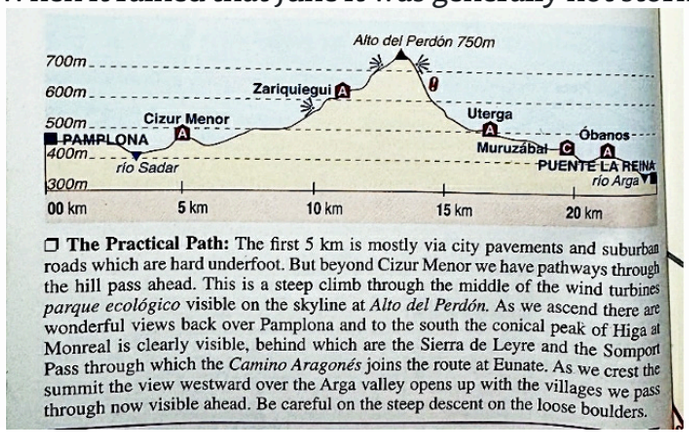
But even so early in the hike (I struggle to refer to it as “on the pilgrimage”) I was feeling a taxing impact on my 65-year old heavy frame. One time I needed to bus ahead over mountains a few miles and Susanna caught up. The hiking guidebook[1] we were using for the Camino was wonderful, and re-published annually with updates. Between each main landmark, town, place of importance there is a chart showing the elevation climbs needed, how many and how severe.

When hiking, I was hauling a 35-pound pack, using my hiking poles necessarily. They were not some cutesy accoutrements.

Even this early I was only doing 5 to 7 miles per day.



It was in an invigorating environment with plenty of coffee breaks. When it rained that June it was generally not stormy.



And if a day threatened to pour all day, we could take a “Zero Day” and just rest in a lovely, safe, friendly Spanish town. We did this only sparingly, but mentally it was an encouragement because we could “take a zero” at any time. The Camino is expectant of its “pellegrinos” (pilgrim-travelers, in Italian). Each town enjoys serving the tourist needs (as I am sure they look at it) and the pilgrims bring a good annual commerce for them.
In our year, 300,000 hikers traversed the Camino.

But the fatigue was of some humiliation and embarrassment to me, although that would not wear hard on my daughter until the end of the experience. She is possessed of a wonderful patience. And I realized we were finally on the way after a year of anticipation. I was "out of my normal routine" with all its guard-rails, expectations and responsibilities, in a sense I could breathe more easily. I had been in a bit of a growing time of stress in my church, then in my 35th year there. We had absorbed a contingent of "transfers" from another church, enfolded them deeply into our church, even into leadership roles. Now they were restless, having gotten over their annoyance with their previous pastor and also having gotten over the novelty of me as their new pastor, unsure about my vision for ministry and as it transpired, on their way to leaving and forming a new church themselves. They would take some of our people with them. So on the Camino, for a season, I was accountable to just one person—my daughter—seeing sights I would never have imagined before—feeling a very "clean" kind of physical tiredness that I had not felt for years, all the way back to cleaning pools in Dallas between seminary classes. That in itself was a healthy thing. Yes, it was manufactured. Life does not grant this luxury often and so we tend to synthesize it from within our normal, modern life if we can afford it. I could afford it. The Pyrenees (named for Pyrene, a princess of Greek mythology from at least the first century) were a different kind of mountains for me to experience. I had grown up around the Blue Ridge. I had visited the Rockies. I had lived near to New Hampshire for decades. I knew the Adirondacks, the Alleghanies and the White Mountains. But the Pyrenees gave off a bit of magic, perhaps because of their age and their lore. I was glad to have visited there,

if only for a few days.

CHAPTER THREE

What is the Camino?

Each year thousands of "pilgrims" start the ancient route from the beautiful small French village of Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port and walk 790 km (about 500 miles) to reach the end at the magnificent cathedral in **Santiago de Compostela, Spain**. The Camino de Santiago has been a popular pilgrimage since the 8th century. It's often said that you don't find the route but instead you "answer the call of the Camino". The Camino de Santiago, or *the Way of St. James* in English, is a network of pilgrims' ways or pilgrimages leading to the shrine of the apostle James in the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia in northwestern Spain, where tradition holds that the remains of the apostle are located. More about that later.

The legend, promoted by the Catholic church, is that in AD 44 the apostle James was martyred in Judea. This is James, the son of Zebedee, called by some historians "James the Greater" (referring to his height, not prominence) He was Galilean and one of the closest of the twelve to Jesus. We read in Acts 12:1-3 (KJV), written by the Greek physician and researcher Luke,

> Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword. And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. (Then were the days of unleavened bread.)

As I walked the trail, I learned the story as developed, preserved and frankly, insisted upon by Catholic writers and Spanish advocates and trail-protectors. The story goes that followers of James took his body, and placed it on a boat at the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea ("the Great Sea") and watched it float out in the tide. The boat, unattended apparently, made its way, surviving surf and weather, all the way to Gibraltar, slipping through and floating up the west coast of Spain, finally beaching itself on the northwest coast. It was found (I never heard by whom), somehow recognized for its importance and perhaps even its identity. The (surely deteriorated corpse by now) was quickly buried nearby, then later exhumed and reburied in the 8th century, so it is said. Then, a medieval cathedral was begun over the grave and **completed in 1211,** in the time of Britain's King John (of *Magna Carta* fame). The *Wiki* article for the cathedral gives:

> According to legend, the tomb in Santiago was rediscovered in AD 814 by Pelagius the Hermit, after he witnessed strange lights in the night sky above the Libredon forest. Bishop Theodomirus of Iria recognized this as a miracle and informed king Alfonso II of Asturias and Galicia (791–842). The king ordered the construction of a chapel on the site. Legend has it that the king was the first pilgrim to this shrine. This was followed by the first church in AD 829 and then in AD 899 by a pre-Romanesque church, ordered by king Alfonso III of León, which caused the gradual development of this major place of pilgrimage.
>
> In 997 the early church was reduced to ashes by Al-Mansur Ibn Abi Aamir (938–1002), army commander of the caliph of Córdoba. St James's tomb and relics were left undisturbed. The gates and the bells, carried by local

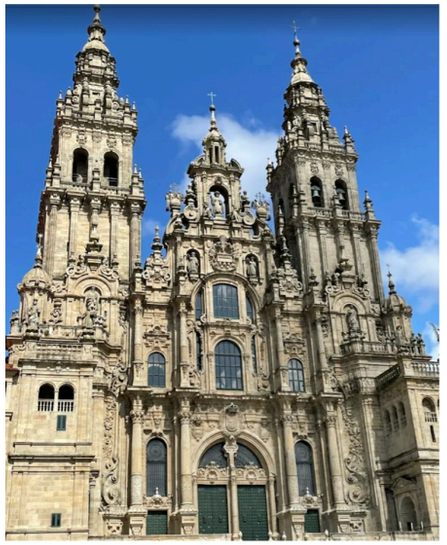
Christian captives to Córdoba, were added to the Aljama Mosque. When Córdoba was taken by king Ferdinand III of Castile in 1236, these same gates and bells were then transported by Muslim captives to Toledo, to be inserted in the Cathedral of Saint Mary of Toledo.

Construction of the present cathedral began in **1075** under the reign of Alfonso VI of Castile (1040–1109) and the patronage of bishop Diego Peláez. It was built according to the same plan as the monastic brick church of Saint Sernin in Toulouse, probably the greatest Romanesque edifice in France. It was built mostly in granite. Construction was halted several times and, according to the *Liber Sancti Iacobi*, the last stone was laid in 1122. But by then, the construction of the cathedral was certainly not finished. The cathedral was consecrated in 1211 in the presence of king Alfonso IX of Leon.

At this point in my story, I am reflecting a certain perspective, with an industrial engineering undergraduate degree (and some small experience in engineering), a master's degree in historical theology and a doctorate of ministry--I am not unfamiliar with the disciplines of researching reputable history. Investigating the truthfulness of a thing, with the challenges of faith that factor into our traditions is something which I greatly respect. But until 2017 I had never heard of this legend. From the Book of Acts I knew of the death of the apostle James and from ancient church history the deaths of some of the other apostles. But *this* tradition, important in Catholic lore in general and in Spanish dignity in specific, was new to me.

I knew of the Old Testament story of Jonah on the Mediterranean. I knew of the story of the apostle Paul at sea on his way to Rome and shipwrecked on Malta. Each story has its miraculous components. I have no problem believing in miracles, properly authenticated and verified. But this story of James' body floating, beaching, being buried and then found almost eight centuries

later, reburied and his bones placed in a silver bone box, is a new one for me. That it is in the dogma of Catholic tradition, by itself, and joined to a Spanish tradition, do not testify to me of its veracity. No matter.



I have the highest regard for all the apostles of Jesus of Nazareth. They were and are of a unique importance, not just in church history but in world history. If there were an indisputable remnant of one of them, or of more of them, I would render all honor and respect to that remnant. The power of the Christian faith however, does not reside in relics. And I don't think I would erect an architectural shrine to him. James was important as they all were. Also, the significant female disciples among them were just as important: Mary (Jesus's mother), Priscilla, Lydia, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, Tryphaena and Tryphosa, etc. etc. But none of them, I would guess, would wish to have become a symbol or an archetype of adoration. And I strongly suspect that James himself would not wish anything to be termed "The Way of Saint James." The "Way" is to believe in Jesus as Messiah, as Savior and as Lord. According to Luke's record, it is the earliest designation of a name for the movement (Acts 9:2). This is what the apostles proclaimed, died for, most of them in martyrdom.

So, I embarked with my daughter on this hike with the highest doubts in the truth in the legend itself. Europe and other places are filled with supposed sites of holy events, miracles, apparitions and more mundanely, heroic projects. In a sense, Christian Europe is a giant testimony of Christ. People seem to want so

badly to believe in a continuing history of spiritual transcendence in events, special persons who appear and an out-of-this world wonderfulness. I understand that. And I do not discount the possibility of miraculous events, driven by power and providence rooted elsewhere than just this material world. All of this to say that I did not embark on this project for some built-in spiritual expectation. I prayed and asked the Lord to do with me, in me, through me whatever He might.

But more dryly even, I have to ask about the importance of relics to begin with? Bones of apostles—James's in Santiago, Peter's underneath the Basilica in Rome, John's in Ephesus (only a faint rumor) or others; pieces of old furniture, even a fragment of Jesus's cross (which the Emperor Constantine's mother, Helena, said that she found on her pilgrimage to Jerusalem), clothing, kitchen crockery, etc etc, even if they could be shown beyond doubt to date to the apostles themselves, how does that contribute to faith?

If the silver bone box that I saw in Santiago really does contain James's bones, or some of them, I am forced to ask, so what? Bone fragments, even if they could somehow be authenticated, do not possess any aura. I know that it is hard to question old traditions, especially since they are held to in a belief that is sincere and unpolluted by a desire to exploit or profit.

But do an apostle's bones possess some special power or holiness? Do they serve as a prayer-portal for faithful pilgrims like the opening of a tunnel, especially if the "pilgrim" goes to the trouble to "walk the way?" My concept of faith and spirituality does not include automatic, sacramental gestures or observances that automatically merit or appropriate God's blessings, or, grace.

And so, people walk the Camino for different reasons - some for religious reasons, others somehow try to find their purpose in life, closure of some major trauma or disappointment, just for the physical challenge, the wine, to discover the local culture. In the film *The Way* the principles are walking, as individuals who randomly meet on the trail, to deal with death of a loved one, to gain clarity to begin writing again, to lose weight and to grapple with loneliness. Each character is dealt with effectively and interestingly. As they all connect, slowly at first, along the Camino, they carve out new friendships with each other. They share some experiences together which would only happen as they are all in the same place at the same time. The Camino provides the backdrop for that.

Reading about it is one thing. Watching film and videos about it is another. But hiking it, the whole thing, is quite another. And I would never have imagined myself attempting such a thing, ten years ago or farther back in my own history. I like to travel, but hiking has never been a strength.

Why do people take "pilgrimages?" My basic reason was rooted

in spending time with my daughter whom I immensely like anyway. She would be the lead in this project; I would be the follower. And she revealed no hidden spiritual stirrings for which this pilgrimage might yield enlightenment. She was eminently practical, straightforward and at least in the beginning, light-hearted. We laughed at many things that we saw together, in the early miles. So, on we went…

Beyond the sublime I can think of other more pedestrian reasons that such pilgrimages are advantageous:

1. It is good to be outside for long periods of time and a benefit is the quiet.
2. It is good to become removed from all the electronic static and distraction of modern life between "devices."
3. It is healthy to meet new people, even if it is only temporary.
4. It is mind-expanding to view parts of a different culture from that to which I am accustomed.
5. A change in food diet, simplification, for weeks at a time can have benefits.
6. There is time to think, pray, meditate without being on a clock.
7. Going on a "news-fast", or a news-detox regimen for several weeks can have a healthy effect on emotion, stress, mental focus and general tranquility.
8. With each night of a clean weariness, sleep can be of a deeper quality.

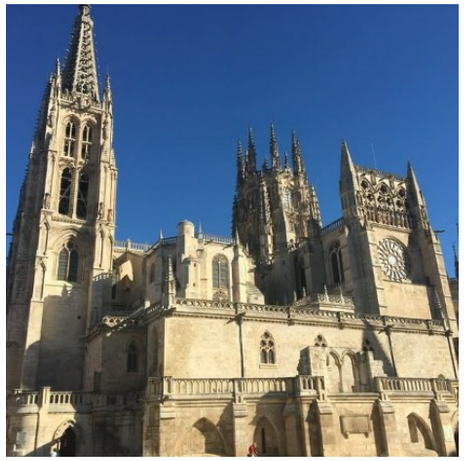
CHAPTER FOUR

Coming out of the Pyrenees and exiting Basque country took us on to more level terrain. Mostly. It was about 210 km (about 130 miles) walking—again, a strange feeling, not driving—out of Pamplona to arrive at the Burgos Cathedral. That was at about the 40% mark.

The days were growing hotter but with many sights to enjoy. At one point we walked on sections of Roman road, laid during the Empire. This was less than pleasant because the path was not flat or smooth. But the ancientness of the roadway and the occasional Roman bridges were enchanting.

Some locations looked like they were lifted right out of famous literature. Often, I thought of scenes in the Shire, in *The Fellowship of the Ring.* But that should not be surprising. Travelling by foot in rural wilderness is a frequent background for many stories in the tales of earlier generations, before automobiles, trucks, motorcycles and hoverboards were invented.

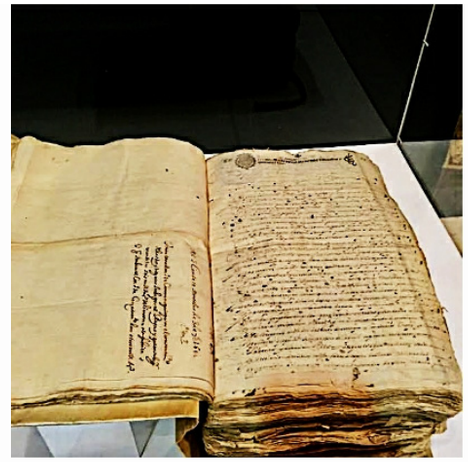
Burgos as a city, dates to AD 885. Its overall municipal population is around 200,000. It is modern, pleasantly laid out and in places gorgeous. Most important is the Gothic **cathedral**, whose construction began in 1221 and took about 200 years to complete. The Cathedral is the resting place for El Cid (the famous knight from Medieval Spain's history) and his wife Dona Jimena. It is huge, beautiful and very old.



In Burgos two events occurred which would change the direction of our trip. The first was Susanna's random meeting of a young Dutchman, Martin, amidst a group of hikers her age who met had met for dinner, and Martin became quite taken with Susanna. I did not meet him. Her path with him would become very important for her, but that is her story to tell. And I was unaware of most of her subsequent communications with him. I can say that he was from **Utrecht**, just outside of which at Huis Doorn,

he German Kaiser Wilhelm II had been housed in exile after World War I and until his death in 1941. That had no relevance to Susanna of course, but my own inescapable and insatiable interest in history noted it.

Susanna was apart from me for a while at this point. We had a hotel room, but she had gone back a day or so on the trail to hike in, when she met Martin. While waiting I walked from our hotel to the cathedral to tour it, about a mile away. It was on a Monday.



The tour was fascinating, and I regretted being alone for this. But I loved all that I saw there. It is a world so very different from most anything in Protestantism, older, and with a basic devotion of its adherents that was humbling to me. The history of it all was intoxicating. But then the euphoria passed dramatically while I was walking home. The second event of Burgos! A sharp, stabbing

pain shot down my left leg and instantly I could hardly walk. I moved from short, stone wall to short stone wall, letting the pain subside. Then I would walk a short distance again until the pain struck.

As I passed another old looking church, I wondered if the front door was open; it was hot outside now and I was sweating profusely. As I went inside into the cool darkness, to what was the **Saint Cosme & Saint Damian** Catholic parish (situated on the left bank of the Arlanzón River, and which I later learned was built in the sixteenth century in a combination of the Late Gothic and Renaissance styles; with its tower added in 1621—not a particularly pretty building, compared to the ornate cathedral I had just toured.) Inside, with my eyes adapting to the darkness, I could see that mass was just beginning (even on a Monday morning) and there were perhaps 30 worshippers sitting in the sanctuary. I thought that if perhaps I could just sit quietly in the back for this service, I would be unnoticed and my leg would "quiet down." It did not, so I quietly got up and tried to leave. But the main door was locked and as I noisily rattled the old door breaker bar, it would not open. The worshippers looked around at this trapped, American interloper! Finally, I found another door which *would* open and I made my escape. It was embarrassing, and my leg was screaming.

I made it back to our hotel and lay down until my leg pain subsided again. I was exhausted, alone and unable to speak Spanish. When Susanna returned, she was not alarmed. She checked my blood pressure which was fine. "Sciatica" or something I think she guessed. "It will probably pass." At least that is the way I remember our reunion. I actually appreciated her cool, clinical assessment which was more comforting than an upset daughter's overreaction might have been. She had other things on her mind anyway.

The hike then moved westward, down the trail. My leg pain came and went but mostly it was manageable with Tylenol.

Waiting with Jane and Daphne to check in (and in a bit of a shower), 40-year friends and both of whom had married men from Japan.

CHAPTER FIVE

Many small towns now lay in front of us. The Camino was now a flat, sometimes snake path, sometimes straightaway between low hills and punctuated with small and very old towns.

The hills were red clay like looking geology, rock formations occasionally.

The picture above made me think of *He hideth my soul in the cleft of the rock, that shadows a dry, thirsty land…*

Along one section of Roman road/the Camino, a nice hipster fellow had set up a table and small lean-to kind of shack with snacks, a cooler of cold drinks and hot coffee, and a book table of free books – "leave one, take one" idea. It was refreshing! Little is as refreshing as a cold soda while hiking in the hot sunshine. I wore a ball cap, of course, but Susanna generally wore a green stocking cap, which made her more visible from a distance. I think at that stop we drank *both* coffee and Coke Zero! He said he was a farmer and came out and greeted pilgrims when he saw them coming down the trail. He was one of the most naturally friendly fellows I think I have ever met.

In one town we passed a "fortified church" which struck me as an interesting concept. Unlike in the U.S. where we have sought definition (and constant rebooting, it seems) of the idea of separation of church and state, such has not always been the case in Europe.

Often in the history of those countries, state and church are linked or allied, and then on the other hand, churches sometimes found themselves without state protection. The community around the church had to defend itself against any attacking enemy, the Moors for instance. So sometimes the churches were given their own fortifications, or perhaps just built as a fortress. In the case of castles, it might include a church within its walls or garrison religious soldiers for its defense. Spanish history is filled with all kinds of variations depending on the royalty in charge, the nature of the government or the international political events. The Moorish invasions, The Crusades, the times

of the Knights Templar, wars with France or England or coastal city-states (like Amalfi) and even Viking raids, and on and on. Our own American history is really still quite young. European (and Spanish) history is two thousand years old and still unfolding.

In one town there was a famous and large castle. My leg was acting

up with its pain so I sat outside on a stone wall and raised my leg up, resting, while Susanna crossed the drawbridge and toured the inside of the castle. Castles have always fascinated me and I was glad that one of us could view this site.

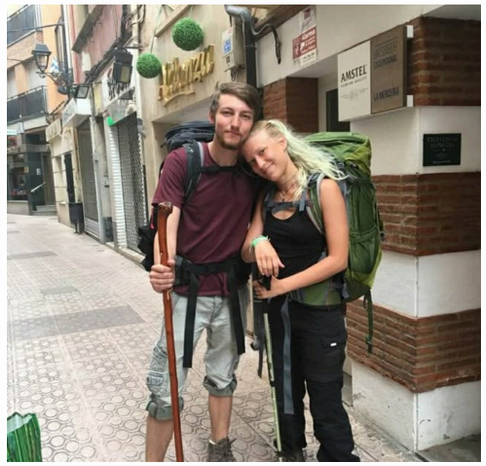
The structure was so classically medieval it was hard *not* to look at it like viewing a Hollywood mock-up, with a subconscious critical eye for realistic detail. This was no mock-up. The details here were real and ancient. It was a Knights' Templar castle from the 13th century, fully intact and yes, capitalized upon for its tourist attraction value. There were no orcs, trolls or dragons. But combat of some sort had been engaged here, eight hundred years earlier. Perhaps catapults and trebuchet were used. Maybe flaming oil projectiles were launched over the walls. Perhaps cavalry units made sorties out and over the bridge and into the unnecessarily area. And while the architecture might strike us as

unnecessarily dramatic, I had to remember that in those days there was no electricity, no night vision goggles, no radar, no computer support, no surrogate drone engagement, no aerial or satellite observation and no gun powder yet. A host military force had the resources and fortifications it could erect on site, the news brought in by courier on horseback or communication by flag, and their own wits. That was it.

We were then in our fourth week on the Camino. There is a side

to the experience that is tedious for a hike like this—some days run together especially if the terrain is the same. There was no danger, no mountain or rock climbing or bandits on the road. The sun was hot (it was late June), and the terrain was pretty predictable. Each afternoon we looked forward to the evening of relaxation, a meal and rest. We almost always had WIFI service at any hostel or albergue. I could enjoy whatever videos I wanted on my small iPad. Susanna does everything on her iPhone, from making reservations, reading reviews, listening to podcasts or an audio book, checking the coming terrain in her eBook version of *A Pilgrim's Guide to the Camino de Santiago*, text messaging, completing financial transactions for air travel or bus tickets, emailing and reading news. She could even track the current whereabouts of other pilgrims that we met along the way. There were three older women travelling together. And there was a young couple from New Zealand, who had their two very small children in a large stroller, hiking the whole Camino! The man, as I remember, was a physician.

There was another very young German couple from Germany, both 20 years old (who informed me that Germans do not use the word "Russkies" now, that it dates from the time of… and he held two fingers under his nose). They were very cute and charming. We had a couple of meals with them. They were travelling a much longer hike, intending to extend their project into the fall and into North Africa (as I



remember).

And there was an old German couple that ran an albergue.

He had served in the German Army I remembered—a certificate on the wall. It was the one night I spent in a bunkroom with a group of male pellegrinos, a bunch of snoring men. The room was tiny and there were, I think, twelve pilgrim men bunking together. I told Susanna the next morning, "that is the last time I am sleeping in a U-boat on this trip."

But she loves the communal aspect of hiking and loves the new friendships she would make. There were several groups of young people, teens or college age. One group was in Pamplona, getting ready for a bike race. They were interested in Susanna and I as we lounged on benches.

Meeting people is part of the experience, which is a main theme in Martin Sheen's movie, *The Way*. We met many very endearing people, from many countries. I actually found the few Americans

that we met to be a little annoying. My fellow countrymen have certain idiosyncrasies that "out" them as Americans quickly, and I

found this to be annoying and entertaining. Susanna picked up on this too. I am sure we were easily identifiable too as American hikers, but we tried to tone down our national *twitch.* In this period, we came upon a town in hill country, that was slightly mountainous. I hiked the most for me of the whole trip, eight miles, as we approached that town. Outside were ruins of an ancient hostel, a sign said. That was intriguing. The ruins sat next to a modern factory.

Susanna had (has) a way of attracting wildlife and they were a delight to her.

We mused a bit about Spanish animals. Dogs, for instance, would not "speak" English, but would respond, perhaps, to some Spanish words. This makes me think of a scene in *Yellowstone* where a local dog knows the Indian word for "dog" (*shunka*) and responds to it. The Indian Chairman notes that "the dog knows his name"—that is why he responds to "shunka." That's the sort of wisdom I would expect Susanna to dispense as we encountered various Spanish animals (cats, frogs, storks, lambs and even river fish.) But I don't remember either of us conversing with a Spanish dog…

When I think about it, between Pamplona and Burgos, all the way to Santiago is pretty simple in the repertoire of what one might see? There is the trail, the landscapes, the weather, the citizenry, the townsfolks and the hospitality community. There are the many fellow pilgrims and an occasional conversation with them. And the old architecture and ruins sometimes. But that's about it. I suppose that in central or southern or coastal Spain or in the biggest cities there is a more modern view and many typically modern pursuits. But on the route of the Camino, it is pretty simple, and it finally dawned on me that this is the beauty of this hike. It removes one from modern frenzy, from modern concerns. There are no visible police presence or military flybys. There is not the interlocked networking of church lives, community obligations, school concerns, political frustration. We saw no large interstate highway exchanges and commercial developments. There's just the trail. And the question, "will they have water to fill my bottle at our next break?"

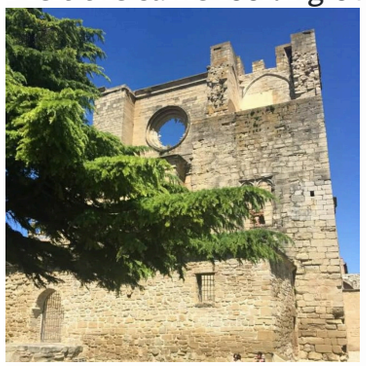
Susanna had told me that "through-hikers" (people who hike long distances on famous or less-than-famous routes, talk incessantly together. But their topics are very limited because of this artificial lifestyle which is intense for a season, but never permanent. Through-hikers talk endlessly about:

1. Food
2. Their equipment
3. The weather

4. Their feet

Maybe there are one or two other urgencies as well which come up--but I remember thinking, “how interesting!” Those are the main issues that hikers are brokering individually and between themselves in their small community. Of these topics, Susanna said, their conversation could be endless. What else could matter much?

And I never grew tired of the old churches. One in particular was fascinating to me. It is the ruins of the **Inglesia de San Pedro** church in Viana, Spain—outside Logroño and still 88 miles before Burgos. It is a church built in the 1200s, as part of the defensive assets of the town. Arrow slits can still be seen in the walls, and its view to the west is majestic with an almost apocalyptic feel. I felt the same looking over the giant plain at Megiddo in Israel.



Here is an example of a whole church history which was born, lived and died before the Reformation was even born. I found the architecture mesmerizing.

I could not imagine the work, financial resources, artisanry, determination, focus, “change orders”, oppositional factors and other aspects that this long project must have involved.

The towns, small communities and occasional animals (storks were all over the place) all ind of blend together in a unified national flavor. Southern France is nothing like it. England, of course, could not be more different. I have not travelled to Portugal so I cannot compare Spain to that countryside (an irony since so many of my Massachusetts friends are Portuguese). North central Spain has its own identity. Its people are noble, kind, fiercely loyal to their various regional histories and to their lore. It seemed like most of the people that we met were born there and would be content to die there. This is so very different from what I have known. I grew up in Northern Virginia, went to college and

lived (and live now again) in southern Virginia. I lived in Dallas for four years and returned for short periods many times, always enjoying a return to the north Texas world of the Metroplex. And Dallas almost seems something like Spain and I knew many Texans who were born there and will die there. The north Texas environs are not dissimilar from northern Spain. Then I lived in coastal New England where both our daughters grew up—as me—in one town. I have been tempered by an inter-regional experience but the Spanish seem little moved at that. They are happy in their culture.

But the international people, hiking the Camino as we were, had a charm too. a group of also-German high school students who were all very friendly to meet two Americans. And there were two nurses (I think they were Swiss) bunking with Susanna in the "U-boat" albergue…. I thought they were both exceptionally pretty

but, of course, I did not say so.

The ancient monastic practice—developed by the "desert Fathers" in early church history-sought a solitude, an isolation from most other people. The belief was that complete quiet and a simple lifestyle

somehow promotes sanctification and holiness. Whole monasteries were founded on this philosophy. And the character portrayed by Martin Sheen in *The Way,* wished to be alone in his grief over the death of his son._In the story though he fails to

achieve aloneness and becomes good friends with the three other pilgrims. But the Camino itself certainly does not easily support that practice. There seemed to be a built-in therapeutic ether in the air of a *community* nature. Both Susanna and I enjoyed the people that we met.

I always enjoy hearing people's stories, their own tales. A hike like this, with plenty of time to hear people, is ideal for those of us who enjoy hearing what people are all about. Where they are from, how they arrived at "today", what their plans or dreams are, are subjects of endless interest to me.

I was also confronted in these days with a small part of myself with which, surprisingly, I had to struggle. Wine, beer and various specialty liquors were served everywhere and much enjoyed by hikers, especially at night. I am such a teetotaler but it was during these weeks that I wished, a bit, that I was not so. Consuming alcohol is just not a high item on the Spanish list of taboos. But it always has been for me. I saw no drunks and remember seeing nobody who *was* drunk in the seven weeks. I'm sure there were some—probably Americans--but the practice was not evident. I am also certain lots of weed was being consumed all around me by some hikers. And so, the issue of use of mind-altering stimulants, such an issue among American Christians, just

doesn't seem to be an issue in Spanish general culture. The matter reminded me, in not being in an American evangelical culture, that not all religious people in the world are rigid about such

things. Of course, some religions are

stricter and some are even oppressive in their monitoring and policing of such things. And I am thankful that I am not in such associations.

There were ancient and sometimes Roman walls toe, frequently.

It struck me during the hike, and it still strikes me that there is something paradoxical about taking a long hike, a "pilgrimage." On the one hand, deep within the human spirit, it feels completely appropriate and healthy and even rejuvenating. Some personality types probably long for such an opportunity. On the other hand, it seems to be a very *unnatural* thing for a person to do—leaving home for a long period, maybe permanently and going to a completely unfamiliar country, escaping or "sabbathing" away from responsibilities in their accustomed residences. I felt caught in this paradox.

But I think of "settlers" who did this by the millions and never to return to their places of origin— the Jamestown adventurers, the Plymouth Pilgrims, the Oregon Trail, the colonizers of nearly every European nation, the native American nations who regularly relocated often across thousands of miles of plains and mountains, the enslaved forced to relocate against their will

and to transport their whole culture to a new place and finally the weirdest "pilgrimage" notion (which might actually happen within my grandchildren's lifetimes), the colonization of Mars.

You think about stuff like this when you're on a long-term trip. It's part of what is so strange about being outside for hours, days on end, doing nothing but walking with brief moments perhaps of short conversation with a hiking partner. You indulge talk about things you would never think to talk about in "normal" life, where we converse endlessly about politics, family issues, the condition of our vehicles, our attire, our dinner menus, and the particulars of whatever community in which we enjoy membership. None of those things come up when you're "out on the trail."

I have travelled to Spain, Italy, Israel, Germany, Belgium, England, Northern Ireland, Haiti, France, Iceland (stopover) and on one Caribbean cruise (does that even count?). The trips to Germany/Belgium, Spain, Israel and Haiti were anything but vacations. Each in their own way was exhausting and driven by one sense or another of "mission." People "travel" to recreate, escape, educate themselves, share some message with a target audience, connect with distant family members, promote the business of their employment, further advance diplomacy, make money, go to war, litigate court cases, take classes, get exercise and see things they have never seen before and suspect, they might never get the chance to see again if they don't do it now. Some of my non-vacation travelling:

Spain (starting in France)– the Camino hike (seven weeks) with Susanna **2018**

Germany/Belgium – tracing my father's route near the end of the Second World War (ten days), with daughter Jocelyn **2013**

Israel – a study tour of biblical sites and Israeli culture with Sandy and Jan Lu Young (ten days) **1997**

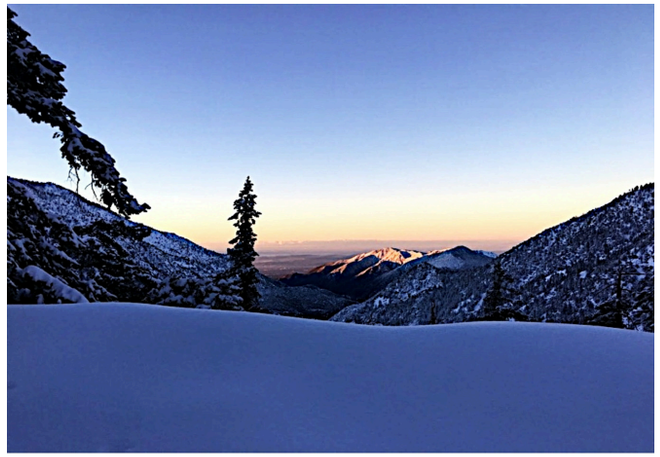
Italy – an art tour led by two art professors (ten days) with Renée **2015**

Haiti – my one "short term" missions trip, exploring the

possibility of founding a Bible institute outside of Port au Prince (one week) **2006**

On the Camino I was hobbled by my leg and then came down with sepsis from an infected tooth. Immediately upon my return to home, I went into the hospital for serious treatment for that condition.

Susanna has travelled to Ecuador (six months, with nursing responsibilities), the Netherlands (five months), Belize, Columbia, Haiti (nursing in an emergency clinic with *Samaritan's Purse* after the earthquake), the Dominican Republic (nursing trip through Yale University School of Public Health), Mexico, France, Spain, Italy, Slovenia, Norway, Sweden, Finland, England. In the U.S. she is a "triple crown" hiker, meaning that she has accomplished complete through-hikes of the Appalachian Trail, the Pacific Crest Trail and the Continental Divide Trail (7,078 miles). She "blogged" and photo documented while on these hikes and she is a wonderful writer and photographer. Here are two shots from her journeys…

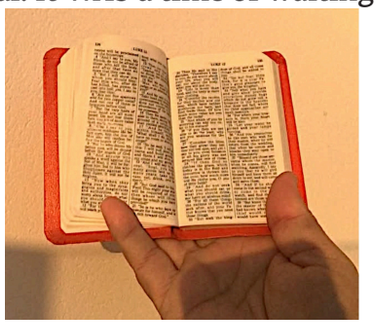


I was getting a toothache and began taking Tylenol to beat back the discomfort. But by about half-way into the trip, it was becoming more distracting. As we approached the city of **León** (I think) Susanna searched on her phone and found an open dental clinic, which we found and entered. The receptionist was wonderfully hospitable and I was seated and examined by a dentist. Susanna interpreted in Spanish. An x-ray revealed an impacted tooth, infected and the dentist recommended immediate extraction. That did not seem to be an option for a Camino *pellegrino*, just passing through. He prescribed an antibiotic which we procured at a pharmacy and went on our way. For the rest of the trip I had a growing discomfort in my jaw and I knew it not to be good. But on we went. The conclusion of the hike was now about three weeks away.

This revealed another under-the-surface part of my personality which I came to realize was implanted way back in my youth—dread about the passing of time. I have never weathered waiting through hardship well. I don't think I was really aware of this part of my "wiring" until these days on the Camino.

I prayed more, longer and with more of an outcry spirit. I did not want to make the trip any harder for Susanna, although I think it came to be a trip of endurance for her. Feeling that made me sad. This was not supposed to be the way this trip was supposed

to go. So I prayed for long periods. I read through my tiny New Testament too, finding well-familiar paths there that came alive with new meaning for me. It was not a time of revival. It WAS a time of waiting for a conclusion.



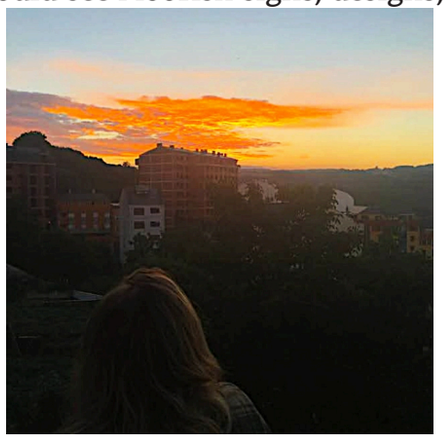
In down times we talked about lots of subjects: the Spanish around us, the other hikers, the endless food discoveries (and repeated choices of which we tired—white bread and olives in particular). For resupply of our packs we selected different small snacks and joked about them. And for me, Coke *Zero* was a constant "next stop." At one lunchtime stop in a town and in a lovely café, sharing a magnificent pizza, we viewed a tiny parade going by on the street outside. We did not know the occasion —some municipal event, I think. But clearly the Spanish love to celebrate!

I'm not sure how identifiable we were at a glance as father and daughter, or if that even mattered. We were two people: one older, tired; the other young and beautiful and full of energy and vim.

It was somewhere around this time that I began to utilize a service along the Camino for transporting backpacks forward to designated albergues, further along. Such a service would cost just a few Euros and with my walking slowing, it was a good service to patronize. Susanna did not seem to mind although it seemed a bit unsportsmanlike to do so. But I did it a few times, keeping my pack on other days.

By this time, we were at about 60% of the Camino traverse. We

went through Astorga, Ponferrada and other smaller towns. We saw little rain now. The sun was bright and the days were long. Sunsets almost always seemed beautiful and lingering, like they were in no hurry, and as late as 10 PM.

Occasionally we would see Moorish signs, designs, old markings that came from the 

centuries after the Eighth after Christ, in which the whole Iberian Peninsula underwent a Muslim invasion, ending the dominant Christian culture. Then, as now, when Islam gains power it makes little room for Christianity. I saw no mosques, per sé, but I am sure they were around. Muslim banners, posters, wall art and carvings were evident in a number of places. This was not really a surprise to me as I had just visited the Amalfi Coast of Italy and viewed the same things there. Interestingly, I saw almost no indications of any Protestant presence. I was certainly not expecting to, but I began to notice a vacuum of anything remotely Protestant. There was one doorway to a small Pentecostal

church…

Another fairly unfamiliar feeling for me was the realization of how dirty one becomes. Showers needed to be deliberate and facilities taken advantage of when presenting, which wasn't really every single night. Taking a shower or a bath—I learned--is a thing an American, I think, comes to take for granted. Of course, Susanna was just as grimy as me and so that was another thing to laugh at together.

Seeing some sights out of urban areas has a rejuvenating effect. Along the Camino there was copious **flora** of northern Spain. It always caught our eye and had a strange effect on our spirits… Little of it seemed intentional or deliberate. Most of it just seemed beautifully random.

CHAPTER SIX

I do not want this book to be a white-washed, all-happy travelogue. There were tensions on the trip. As mentioned before my leaving for seven weeks on a "sabbatical" that was without precedence in our little church's history placed a small stress on me forcing me to use vacation time to complete the Camino. The stress of travel is always a drain on energy for me and this amplified as the trip progressed. I was going to a land where I do not speak the language and would be placing myself completely at the discretion of my daughter who is fluent in Spanish. And relationally there were stresses between my daughter and myself. We were able to talk some about them after, for which I am very glad.

I have said, and maybe I would back off of this comment now, that in general I would not recommend to anyone to spend seven weeks with one grown child, alone, in a foreign environment from which neither of you can easily escape or terminate the trip. And as mentioned, only one of us speaks the language of there, making the other one of us dependent on the first one regardless of the mood of the moment. This is an aspect of a Camino hike NOT explored in *The Way* by Martin Sheen. In that film everyone speaks English, all the time, and comfortably. For us the occasional separation between my daughter and myself as she bussed back to avoid missing any stretch of the Camino, and then rejoined me while I rested, was a blessing. It gave each of us a chance to breathe. I don't know who she interacted with, befriended or hung our with on her excursions but I was largely alone.

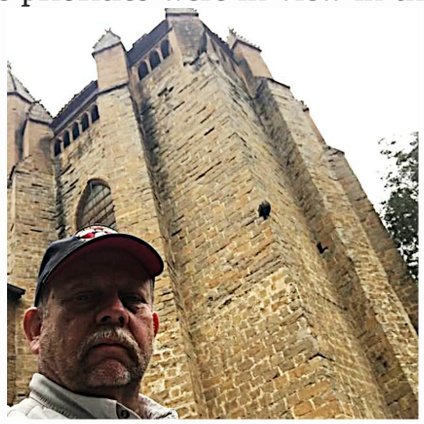
And that, in fact is what made the time so special. It was not just

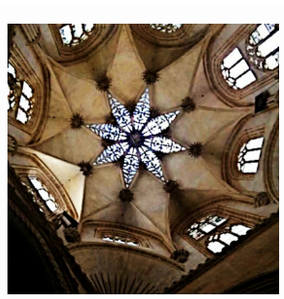
a vacation. It was not a “missions trip.” It was not a Peace Corps, a Hurricane Katrina Recovery trip, or a Habitat for Humanity project. It was not an “arts” trip, a culinary exploration trip, a “bucket list” check-off list-trip. It was not visiting European family members, learning Spanish ways or any other typically designated excursion. It was something that, I think, neither of us was completely prepared for and which made it special and precious. At least that is how I think of it now. I will not get to do something like that again, I am sure.

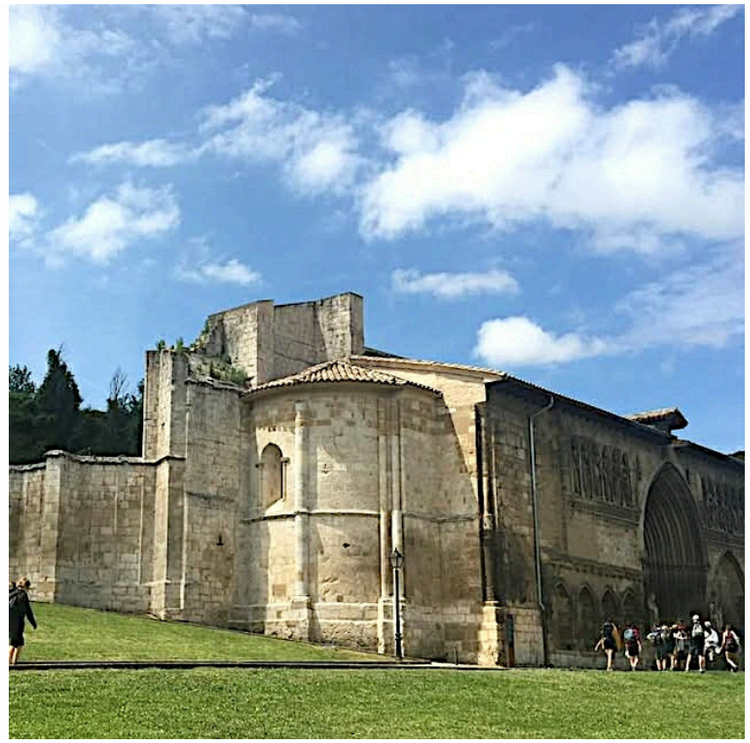
I cannot overemphasize the impact on me, burned into me, of seeing so many Spanish churches, wedded with my love of architecture. I wondered how the parishes accomplished each one, what their stories were. The Burgos cathedral took 200 years to build! Somebody had some determination and some focus to make sure that project was completed. By 2018 I had overseen (“as clerk of the works”) the complete design, construction, financing and outfitting a one new church and observed the same thing with several other “sister” churches in southern New England. Our church took nine years to plan and one year to construct. It required some notable hard work and stick-to-it-iveness and good leadership by key church members, to complete. But we were all exhausted after the decade of work. I thought of this, mediated on it, while viewing so many ancient Spanish structures. Susanna was not impressed with much of this brooding in me, and we did not speak of it, as I remember, but it was often on my mind.

I could have spent a week in and around each Spanish parish sanctuary that we walked past. The only two I entered were the Burgos cathedral and the church nearby (in which I caused a ruckus). The dominant and ancient medieval practice of fortifying churches fascinated me. No American church is built this way, even the oldest and most noble. As to construction, we tend to be far more pragmatic and cost-sensitive in details, utilitarian. Sometimes I have found this frugality almost offensive, demanding a spartan business plan for a “space”

dedicated to the spiritual. Foundation walls and “footers” are efficient, quickly laid in and durable (whether for centuries, that remains to be seen.). Walls and windows and rooves today are cost-effective and engineered for relatively cheap fabrication. Their insulating, ease-of-grounding, compatibility of materials and general appearance quality are all governed by a competitive industrial environment, which works nicely for the local congregation raising a building. One wonders how many, if any, of those priorities were in view in the Middle Ages in northern Spain…





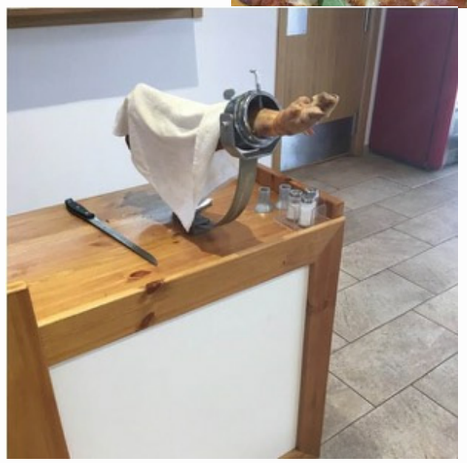


One small and unassuming location, next to a bus stop, earned our study. It was an open-air chapel, dedicated for prayer but themed for firefighters. I only saw the one such place with a nod to public servants and seemingly beckoning prayer for them. No signage explained or gave any exposition to the goal, history or hope of this chapel. I suppose if you have to ask, well, “move on.”

We also kept coming upon what were obviously Roman-era structures. I don't know why I subconsciously thought that if we viewed one such ruin on the whole hike, the checkbox could be fulfilled. But as it turned out there were quite a few. Rome was an amazingly innovative, industrious and creative caldron of engineering creations.

Aqueducts, use of bricks (perhaps influenced by Egyptian practices), the invention of concrete, roadway consistency and modernization, a melding of art and religious or "spiritual" themes in architectural decoration were all definitive as Roman in European development. It stretched as far as Britain, Germany and the Middle East and deep into North Africa. It should not have surprised me to see so much Roman evidence on the Iberian Peninsula. And the most amazing feature is all of its longevity. Will American architecture still be visible in 2,000 years?

I have already mentioned the culinary experiences. But now, as I recall, there were many.



I am not culturally so enlightened to actually *like* everything

put on the table in front of me, but I could appreciate the classiness of presentation which I also saw to great effect in Italy. Professor Tony Miraglia told us, in Italy "if you want to experience good engineering, go to Germany. If you want to experience good efficiency, go to Switzerland. If you want to see good design, go to Italy." He did not mention Spain, Portugal or France, but then again, he is Sicilian.

Signage is also something I noted in Spain. Obviously, the language and pronunciation were a challenge for me, but I observed a tactful balance between good information and a lack of gaudiness along the Camino, as we might see in this country near Gettysburg or perhaps near other historically important sites. Signage along our path was always tasteful. I thought Laguardia is in New York City? Who knew?

Walking, stopping and resting my leg, observing, praying. That was my agenda for these days. I learned that hikers often (and maybe mostly) walk at a different pace and gait from each other. So, it is not unusual for one to move ahead. Not a surprise—I was quite slow; Susanna walked at a brisk, undistracted pace. Often, I would see her way ahead, perhaps as much as a mile. Her hat kept her in view. On the longest day for me (8 miles) I watched her climb up a long incline into a town and disappear. I just kept trudging along. Then I saw her returning to me to inform me that she had located our albergue and confirmed our reservation for that night.

How should one write about such a trip? My desire is to depict this trip plainly. It was a hard experience. But it was by choice and design. We each experienced much that was first time, not the least of which was to spend so much exclusive time together. Since I have such a natural and lifelong delight in my daughter's personality, to be privileged to spend seven weeks together seemed to be a great prospect. And it was a great time to be with her. But also, I learned like I was being awakened, that our children turn into adults. They are not small clones of us. They do not just imitate our speech, convictions, opinions and interpretations of the world around us. They do not necessarily synchronize with us politically, as grown and experienced adults. They do not necessarily appreciate the same values and beauties as do we. They do not necessarily possess the same inner self, spirit or sense of the Lord as do we. And they may be energized by a need to articulate a different perspective. This of course, is what Renée and I wanted our daughters to become. They are each their own persons. Susanna was, at that time, a 33-year-old Registered Nurse. She had lived in many places and had become a part of a lot of different communities, adopting the convictions of some of her peers and generational identity. At the same time, as we dialogued, debated and dissected, she still had some stamp on her of being my daughter. I don't know how that could have been detoured. She has a very similar sense of humor to me. She loves to read as I do. She can laugh at media humor as I do.

She feels things deeply as I do. Not everyone is like us. Some personality temperaments are more coleric and others more

melancholy. She and I both are pretty sanguine. We may become annoyed or angry but we tend to—or at least want to—get over such quickly.

I also relearned, by close observation, she does not spend her money foolishly. She is not mesmerized by a continual bombardment of entertainment videos or movies. She is a bit of a minimalist but she is not extreme in this and finds among her hyper-minimalist friends something to parody. She loves her friends and I enjoyed hearing updates about them from her. They are all over the country. She has good potential as a group and event leader as she has explored that recently. She plays hard and she sleeps hard. She understands nutrition and yet loves a good meal, and as often as possible doing its preparation from scratch. She is a consummate pragmatist, which I associate with the necessities of nursing and the education and continual updating of those skills.

Thousands of memoirs have been written and published about one's child, parent, brother or sister. But it feels risky to dare to same something, in print, about the daughter of a daddy. But I could not be more proud of her on our trip and I felt a great sense of privilege even in some pain and discomfort as I was. She was a good nurse and helper throughout.

CHAPTER SEVEN

When a Camino pellegrino, coming from St. Jean Pied de Porte comes into **Sarria**, the end is in sight, emotionally at least. He has come 414 miles along the trail. Susanna and I took the *Renfe* train the 22 miles from Sarria to Lugo and then finished, on foot, the last 66 miles to Santiago.

I had been alone in Sarria for two days and two nights, booked in a comfortable albergue and spent several hours, when my leg was cooperating, walking through the town, to coffee shops, reading and taking in the culture.

But I came to small but something of a startling realization. In Spain they are not particularly fascinated by the independence of the United States from the British Empire. Thus, they do not celebrate or even acknowledge our Independence Day of the USA in Spain. I was in the albergue over July 4th but there were no fireworks exploding anywhere. As I instinctively half-listened for booms of celebrational pyrotechnics and half-glanced from the plastic chair on my little balcony, it was just a normal and quiet Wednesday night--one of the loneliest nights of my life. It was my first July 4th ever spent outside of my own country and I was alone. But it made me appreciate (a little) how immigrant communities in the USA retain regular celebrations of their own cultures although they are expatriates now, with: Cinco de Mayo for Mexicans; Chinese New Year for Chinese; St. Patrick's Day for Irish and Bastille Day for the French.

Loneliness is a timeless problem. We can trace it all the way back to creation as God looks at Adam and seeing him alone, does not pronounce it "good." And since then, through all the millennia, up to now people have usually sought solutions. They form friendships, they date, they marry, they have chil
dren, they move in together, they join organizations, they create social media "friendships" online, they take trips together, they partner in action groups, they do projects together, they correspond over long distances and maybe over decades, they

form clubs together, they join churches, they serve on boards and committees and teams and on and on. Ultimately, I think, it is to avoid loneliness.

Unless of course, they are of the "desert fathers'" persuasion and they *want* isolation for reasons mentioned earlier. But even then, they rarely completely seek solitude. Even then they are a small band of hermits and support their tiny fellowship.

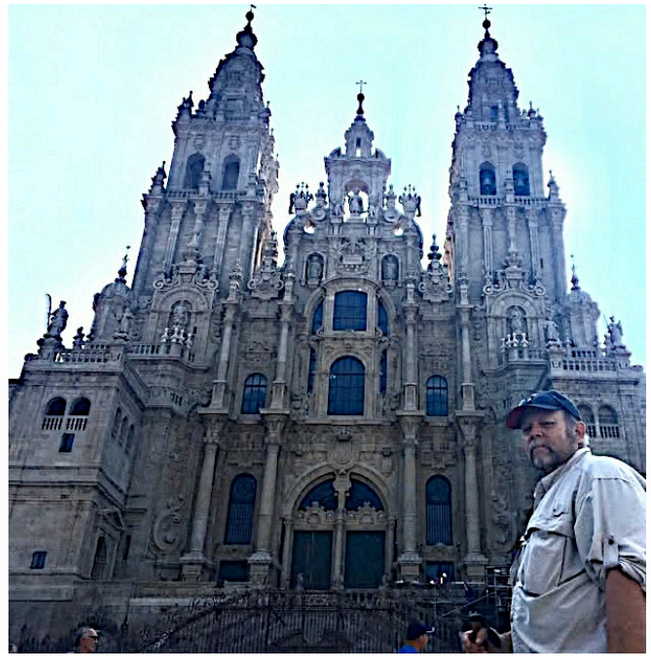
Susanna has a natural affinity to form new acquaintances and then friendships. I loved watching her meet new Spanish locals, get to know them some and then before I knew it they would be laughing in Spanish! She disarms in a way that I envy and have been smitten with an opposite tendency—people tend to "unsnap their holster" when they get around me. And so I discovered this natural way that she has, as does her mother. Clearly. My daughter, I am confident, will not end her sojourn on this planet alone or without a sizable community of friends.

As we neared Santiago, as in the film, *The Way,* the approach is dramatic. From quite a way off you look down into the city and can view the cathedral. But there is another striking difference between actually doing it, and watching it in a dramatic film. In reality there is no music. The music of *The Way* is wonderful. In reality there is the sound of the wind, and then once into the city, the sound of cars and people.

Once arrived there is a whole new set of fascinating visual delights to take in. Other pilgrims, many of more

Catholic conviction milling about, either completing their pilgrimages or in a few cases beginning and

heading east.

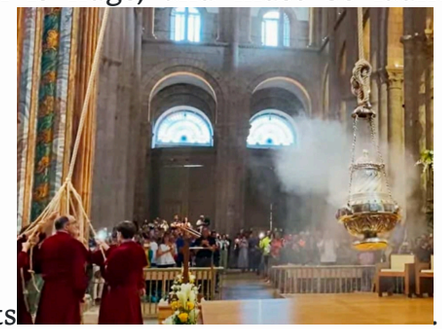


When one's whole spiritual life has been spent in Protestantism, self-defined in American evangelicalism, comfortably rooted in Reformed theology, armed with apologetic and even irenic verbal weaponry, a visit to a place like Santiago forces a number of reactions. Part of my "pilgrimage" was to unravel each of these reactions. In this I was alone in my thoughts, even after returning home.

First is the tendency to dismiss all that I saw as somehow not Christian. When we define "Christian" as something that is driven purely and militantly by solely biblical criteria, with an insistence that if it is to be believed it must be clearly demonstrable with good Old and then New Testament exegesis only, then we leave no room for the mysticism of legend, ancient tradition or non-Protestant authoritarianism. Empowered with the Reformation principles of *sola Scriptura, sola fide* and *sola gratia*, I did not unravel myself from these convictions but I was forced to wonder about some overlaps between my own theology and the legacy of Catholicism might be viewable throughout Spain. If any overlap

is there, it struck me as accidental not by design. Actually, the ubiquitous Roman ruins fed a sense of continuity back to within sight of the time of Jesus Himself. Spain does not own a great spiritual history, in my view, albeit ancient and filled with a few noble heroes. But there has been a *Christian* presence there all the way back, and under assault, literally and figuratively, by Islam—I am mindful that the apostle Paul aspired to get that far west with the Gospel (although it is doubtful that he did.)

Second was an appreciation for that which is honestly hungry, spiritually, within Spanish culture. At one albergue interlude, as I sat in the coffee shop with my iPad and a nice cup of afternoon Spanish cappuccino, I was approached by four Spanish teenage boys. They were very friendly and disarming, but only one spoke any English. I must have looked like a good candidate for an invitation to an event for which they handed me a flyer. It was a special mass that evening, for "lorry drivers" passing through their town, that would be evangelistic in nature. I was invited, and "won't you please come?" A well-known priest, known for being a good speaker would be the highlight. I was charmed.

Third is the set of *some* traditions which just seem somehow good, if not specifically precedented in a New Testament way and in no contradiction to any apostolic teachings. One of these is the swinging incense burner in the cathedral of Santiago which is huge, and must be launched by a whole team of priests  . As it swings from one side of the sanctuary to another it dispenses the aroma of incense which is strong and pleasant. Apparently, this was begun many

hundreds of years ago to combat the smell of so many deodorant-free pilgrims coming into the cathedral. I did not witness this ceremony although it is shown in *The Way,* a concession Martin Sheen said was given to the film makers when the movie was made. The ceremony is done on certain holy days and Susanna also viewed it just this year, as she hiked the last piece of the trail that leads from the cathedral all the way to the ocean (the Fisterra route, another 50 miles or so).

Another observation in the cathedral, which receives a significant emphasis in the film *The Way,* is the presence of a column dedicated to "St. James" which has a hand-shaped cavity on its front. For centuries pilgrims would, in some dedicatory or prayerful gesture, place their hand in that cavity for a moment. Wiki gives the story: The deeply grooved handprint on the central column of the Portico of Glory in the Santiago de Compostela Cathedral represents the centuries-old tradition of pilgrims completing the Camino de Santiago. By placing their hand in the hollowed-out space, pilgrims symbolically connect with the millions of travelers who have come before them.

This ritual holds several significant meanings for pilgrims:

- **A sign of completion:** Resting one's hand on the pillar is a symbolic act that signals the end of the long and

arduous journey of the Camino.

- **Unity with Christ and other pilgrims:** The handprint ritual represents the unity between the pilgrim and Jesus Christ, who is depicted above the column in the Portico's sculpture. It also connects them to the countless pilgrims who have shared the same spiritual path throughout history.
- **The culmination of a prayer:** While touching the pillar, pilgrims are meant to offer the prayer of petition that first inspired their journey.

The handprint is located on the central column, also known as the Tree of Jesse, which depicts the human genealogy of Christ. It is one of several traditional rituals pilgrims once performed at the Portico:

- **Severe erosion:** The deep grooves of the handprint are the result of countless hands touching the same spot over hundreds of years, causing significant erosion to the stone.
- **Discontinued practice:** Because of the damage caused by the ritual, the cathedral's authorities have taken steps to limit access and prevent further deterioration of the medieval masterpiece.

By our arrival in July 2018, the practice was off limits although the line to view the column reached around several halls and corridors and was taking more than an hour for a visitor to get through, to briefly stand at the column. Susanna and I, conversely, walked down three stairs and immediately stood in front of the chamber containing the silver bone box, reputed to actually contain the apostle James's bones. There was no line there which hit me as an epitome of irony.

As the trip came to its conclusion, we stayed in a hotel near to the airport in Santiago.

As we lounged in the hotel's café and relaxed, there were Ryanair pilots also waiting. Apparently, there was a pilots' strike imminent. Fortunately for us, the strike vote was delayed and we caught our scheduled flight to Paris. We stayed one night at the airport there and then said our farewells as I headed to Boston and Susanna flew to her next hike-departure project, in Washington State.

As I arrived in Boston, made my way to the "T" and from there to Lakeville, I was ready to be home. Renée met me in Lakeville and as I grabbed her I wept. It was so good to be home and I don't think she grasped how much I had missed her.

After scheduling an immediate dental extraction and a subsequent antibiotic infusion regimen at Hawthorn Medical Associates, overseen by (the late) Dr. Matthew Messina, my doctor (I had become septic), I began to reacclimate to normal life from the "pilgrimage." My fellow churchmen seemed only minimally interested, as I remember. But I had many experiences to share, a good *Powerpoint* presentation and two sermons based on the experience.

CONCLUSIONS

Now seven years later, my summary of the trip can speak to 1) the decision to go, to begin with; 2) the financial costs associated with going; 3) the impact of the trip on my relationship with my grown daughter; 4) impact on my church as they watched their pastor embark on a very non-typical and lengthy (almost two-month) absence for an evangelical (which is to say *not* Catholic) and largely conventional leader; 5) the sites and experiences which can be seen as in two categories: first-time and once-in-a-lifetime.

The Decision to Go

As I look back, we made the decision very quickly. After the joint-viewing of *The Way* and imagining the freedom for each of us to embark, we decided within a day to begin to explore and make tentative plans. We did not imagine any real resistance from our employers and I did not worry that Renée would be uncomfortable with my doing this project. No one knows better the personal state of mind I was in at the time than Renée and I appreciated her sense that a sabbatical would finally make sense for me, emotionally and professionally.

Financial Costs

As I remember it, each of us invested something around three thousand dollars to do the trip. We were each in a position, happily sharing various expenses, to afford doing this project. I am glad for that. Stress from finances, at least for me, was not a factor.

The Impact of the Trip on My Relationship with My Grown Daughter

This is more challenging to sound out, even now years later. I do not want to sound clinical about it. It was the most trying and challenging, and wonderful exploration of a parent-child experience I can imagine. I am grateful for having done it.

I had hoped and prayed that we would easily grow closer and more trusting spiritually just by having enough time together and by some answering to prayer. I don't think that happened, my fault. I become defensive about the evangelical Christian movement to which I have given most of my life. And when I would become defensive, not a frequent occurrence, my daughter found that triggering for her. This was and is a mystery for me. I can only resolve to pray, try to ask for forgiveness for saying things critical or reacting with any perturbance.

These were days when I realized like I had not before quite so deeply, that our children become adults. As such, and if blessed with intelligence, courage and determination, they will "go out" from us to find their own lives. That doesn't always mean physical distance permanently. But it does mean that they will come to earn a respect and craft a self-definition that is different, perhaps widely so, from what I am or from what I envisioned for who was once my child.

On the one hand I would wish for anyone pondering a similar excursion with his or her grown child, for no stress, no dissension and nothing but mutual respect and love. And on the other hand, I think that how we manage our expectations is a good preparation for such a trip. We should not expect more than each partner is willing or able to give. We can expect good conversations—many--supportive sympathy if there are any physical or medical problems (which I, of course, developed). We can expect to enjoy discovery of things neither of us has seen before. We can expect to treat each other, even when exhausted, with respect, empathy and interest. We should not "clam up" which is a selfish thing to do when your partner is the only other relationship in the project. Isolation is a cruel strategy, well documented in literature. But also, each

partner needs plenty of alone-time to ponder and recalibrate their feelings. Each partner deserves solitude as often as they emotionally need it and we are all different in this regard. Figuring out how to bless each other is part of the learning experience that does not come from just hiking alone, or travelling alone.

The Impact on My Church

This was not an easy thing to calculate and I am not sure that the leaders really cared much other than the implication of sabbatical of pay-with-no-work, a reality unheard of in a working class city —except at the University. The pulpit was filled adequately each week and my staff soldiered on without me. They knew I was coming back. They were moderately excited for whatever stories and lessons I might bring to them. My Catholic friends on the University staff seemed more intrigued.

The Sites and Experiences

Perhaps these are the important and lasting aspects to the hike. They were of two natures: first-time ever, and once-in-a-lifetime. I will not have that opportunity again, I am sure, and with that conviction I treasure all that I saw, felt, smelled, tasted, heard and felt even more greatly. Those sites and experiences are bored deep into my psyche now, and with great appreciation and gratitude, especially to Susanna for her willingness to go, and her hanging in there with me.

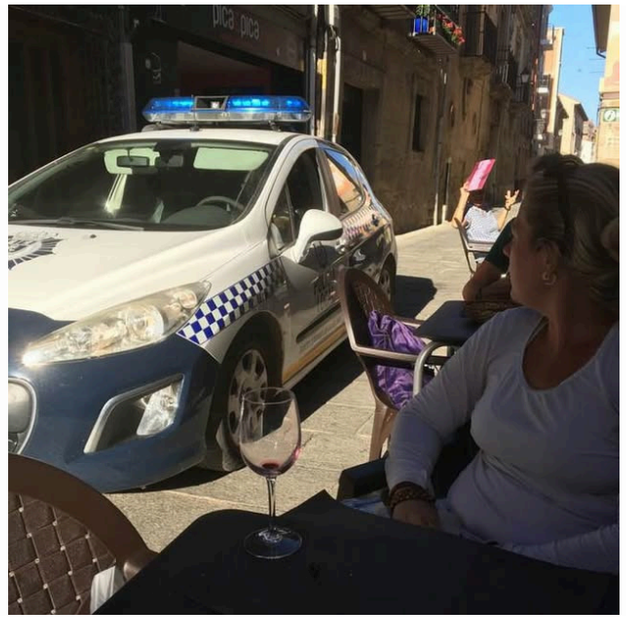
The sites included the trail itself, with Roman-laid road bedding at times; the Roman walls and bridges; the churches or church ruins. These were for me, the most powerful testimonies of an era long gone. In contrast, and oddly, the cathedral itself left me mostly unmoved. But other churches which I saw in Spain were beautiful, amazing in the scope of construction and ornamentation and so marvelously valued and revered by the population around it. But the two cathedrals held no mystical or spiritual quality for me. I have appreciated many churches before, old and new: The National Cathedral in Washington D.C., All Souls Church in

London, Martyrs Memorial Church in Belfast, the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth, the Dome church in Berlin, Park Street Church in Boston, Saint Peter's in Rome, the humble little church in Gand Goave, Haiti (I cannot remember its name), Northwest Bible Church in Dallas, Stonebriar Community Church in Frisco, Texas, Dartmouth Bible Church in Dartmouth, etc. But if nothing else the Santiago cathedral stands as a testimony to what it stands for, and for the continuing belief in the veracity of James the Apostle and all the apostles' preaching, it resonates with me.

Other sites were significant, even once only viewed for my life. I loved the old town from which we "launched", St. Jean Pied de Port. It was untouched by modern flashiness. The first night in Arneguy, France, the night in Zabaldika with the four sisters, the slow, unhurried self-tour through the Burgos cathedral, the four teenage Catholic evangelists and their clean sincerity, walking the Abbey Road crosswalk with Susanna, the last night in Paris, and the exquisite and painful joy or returning to Renée were all powerful and one-time experiences. Together, they all broadened my perspective, instilled some small but permanent gratitude to the Lord for His providence and provision. And seeing all these sights (except the return home) in company with my younger daughter, now a fully accomplished, experienced and wizened adult, was a rare jewel of blessing which will follow me all of my days.

If the chance to do such a thing with a grown child arrives, I would recommend it be taken without hesitation. The beauty of the Camino is that it is not a goal-based tour. It is not a mission-defined, check-point speckled project. It is just *there* to be experienced and discovered for its own wonder and beauty. I found no mystical orbs, had no burning moments of revelation and met no permanent persons of providence. But if I could, I would do it again in a moment!

Early in the trek, we passed through a town with this wall, standing by itself. Susanna learned from our albergue hostess, that it was a recent construction, for handball. I did not believe that tale of its genesis. I was sure it was ancient and I could not imagine why anyone would invent a new story of its building…



One late afternoon rest and beverage stop, brought us a brief visit from the local constabulary. They were friendly, just curious. Here, at the Burgos cathedral.

Like many of life's greatest joys, which blaze briefly and then are gone, this pilgrimage will remain with me in memory and appreciation and happiness for the rest of my days. I learned pieces of my daughter's personality that I had not seen before. The Spanish plain accommodated that. I delved into a non-distracted season that allowed me to think, pray and discover. It felt a bit like Magellan. I saw parts of European history that few among my associates have seen, even within the graduate school community that I loved. A few there, Dr. Ron Blue of Dallas Seminary; the late missionary (and WWII veteran and USS Tennessee survivor) Gordon Gustafson who devoted years to Spanish ministry through the Overseas Christian Serviceman's Center—these would understand what I saw…

But most important was the unrushed relationship trek with my grown daughter. Thank you, lovely daughter, for the privilege!

Epilogue

You step out of modern culture, into the past. It might not be for long and it may seem like a bit of being in a dream. The rocks in the road, in places under your shoes, were dug into place one by one, by Roman slaves. The bridge arches were laid out without C.A.D. They have stood for over 1,500 years. The people are not American. They are not English. They are Spanish, some Basque. The air is not industrially complicated. It is clean. Your mind is detoxing at first, emptying of some of its stress. And the first day turns into the second. And the second into the third and soon it is weeks. You learn things. You see ancient ruins of churches and castles.

The food is usually simple. The walking is monotonous except you know where you're going. Always.

Your daughter is ahead, behind, watchful, working out her own things in her mind. She is cheerful, light-hearted, ready to laugh at something. She attracts all kinds of pedestrian Spanish wildlife —no mountain lions and no eagles. Nothing so dramatic. But anyone who approaches her gets her affection.

You step back on to the plane in Paris. You fly back to America, alone. You're tired but your heart is full. God blessed you with this trip. One or two, maybe, will be glad when you arrive home… and you will not pass this way again.

Proof